

The Montanian

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## Asbestos cleanup to begin in May

### *EPA to supervise as Grace begins work*

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will begin overseeing the removal of asbestos-contaminated soil from at least two Libby starting in May, and W.R. Grace & Co. will hire the workers and pay the costs, according to an EPA official in Libby. "We have targeted two places in town for cleanup," said Paul Peronard, EPA's on-scene coordinator in Libby. "One is the old plant and railroad loading station down off the Kootenai River. We're in the process of ... negotiating a three-way agreement with the property owners about how we're going to schedule and do the cleanup around their business operations at the screen. Right now it looks like we're going to start in May," Peronard said.

The asbestos contamination came from the former W.R. Grace & Co. vermiculite mine and processing plant that operated in Libby for decades. Vermiculite ore that was mined up Rainy Creek was contaminated with dangerous tremolite asbestos. The cleanup will involve removing one foot of topsoil off the property currently used by Raintree Nursery, owned by Mel and Parker.

"That should take all the vermiculite asbestos off the property. It'll get hauled off either to a secure landfill or ... back to the river itself," Peronard said.

"We're working out whether [the Parkers] want us to have the buildings cleaned or demolished. They're worried about whether they're going to come back into business after this or whether they're going to retire. They have to work out a different agreement with Grace about their compensation for loss of business," Peronard said.

The cleanup includes "about 70 percent" of 21 acres owned by the Parkers.

The cleanup across the river from the Parker property will be more limited.

"We didn't find as much [vermiculite] over there," Peronard said.

"There's an area east of the nursery that's owned by Kootenai Development Corp. ... that had some storage piles [of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite ore] there," Peronard said those areas will be tested as the cleanup progresses.

"The work is fairly basic. ... It is not complicated work," he said.

"Right now what we're going to attempt to do is have Grace actually hire and pay the contractors to do the cleanup. I'll do the work," Peronard said. "They'll put together a work plan before anything gets done and I'll get that out for public review comment," he said.

Peronard said this first job will be finished soon.

"It shouldn't take more than a couple of months," he said.

"We still have to resolve how we want to leave the property and that will depend on the wishes of the Parkers," Peronard said.

"We're not going to scrape it off and leave it denuded. We'll have to bring in topsoil, we'll have to replant and reconfigure the site," he said.

The cleanup at the former export plant near the baseball fields in Libby won't begin until more test results are in, Peronard said. The area is currently occupied by Millwork West.

"What I'm waiting for now is the data back from the ball fields and the areas around that to get the full handle on the scope of what we do out there. It will all progress in similar fashion to how we do at [Raintree Nursery]. You dig down with some coring, keep dust levels down and you have to outfit workers for proper respiratory protection, but it's not particularly complicated work," Peronard said.